

**Postmodern Materialism and
the Future of Marxist Theory**

Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory

Essays in the Althusserian Tradition

Edited by Antonio Callari
and David F. Ruccio

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Althusser and Hegel: Making Marxist Explanations Antiessentialist and Dialectical

The commitment to antiessentialist ways of thought, now significant and growing across many domains of knowledge, owes considerable debts to Althusser's Marxist reading of Hegel (especially Althusser 1972, 161–86). At the same time, a certain self-questioning about that commitment has recently arisen among those who share it. Is consistently antiessentialist explanation of social phenomena always possible or always desirable? Such questioning represents a maturation of antiessentialist thinking. It has moved beyond its first phase of critically exposing the absolutism of all efforts to formulate the “foundations” or “essences” or “ultimate causes” of the objects of human thought and to “guarantee truth” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 57). Now, as it explores the new worlds (or in Althusser's related phrase, the “new continents”) that it has opened up, antiessentialism encounters and engages its own contradictions and so raises new questions and doubts. Rethinking the Hegel-Althusser connection as proposed here enables an answer to the questions and perhaps, thereby, a further contribution to antiessentialism. Secondly, such a rethinking may, by its appreciation of Althusser's *positive* attitude toward and use of Hegel's dialectics, offset what I believe are the one-sided exaggerations of opposition between Althusser and Hegel.¹

The author would like to thank both editors, Antonio Callari and David Ruccio, for their acute and very helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions on earlier drafts. Also, George DeMartino and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised and defined several of the central problems to which this chapter offers a response.

1. Both Althusser and his critics have exaggerated the opposition. Althusser did, however, recognize his overly negative attitude toward Hegel, especially in his 1969 essay “On the

The questions and doubts may be grouped around two concerns. First, is it possible consistently to think in antiessentialist ways, or is some essentialist or reductionist argument inevitably reached in any constructed knowledge? In other words, notwithstanding antiessentialist disclaimers, are not all explanations of events ultimately essentialist? Second, may essentialist modes of thought be preferred, at certain times and places, because of their specific, conjunctural effects in changing the world in particular ways?² My response to these concerns, developed on the basis of reworking Althusser's Marxist engagement with Hegel, reinforces the principled commitment to antiessentialism. However, it does so by reaffirming its “other,” the essentialist “moment,” as always interwoven dialectically with antiessentialist analysis.

Althusser's theoretical work on Freud's notion of overdetermination provoked the development of various kinds of antiessentialist theory from Marxian bases.³ In this way, it interacted productively with other currents of thought (poststructuralism, postmodernism, etc.) that approached and developed antiessentialism from other starting points (antifoundationalism in literary criticism, certain kinds of feminism, etc.). Many of the contributors to antiessentialism, including Althusser, rejected the sorts of essentialist thinking that they associated with existing social conditions (capitalist and other exploitative class structures, sexism, racism, nationalism, homophobia, etc.) to which they were deeply opposed.

Antiessentialist theorists have also argued that essentialist modes of

Materialist Dialectic,” when he wrote, “Everything we have published on Hegel in fact leaves out the positive heritage Marx, by his own confession, owed to Hegel” (1972, 174). Some of Althusser's critics built upon the opposition to attack his criticisms of Hegel as unwarranted revisions of Marx that lose the dialectic that Marx and Hegel shared (Norman and Sayers 1980, 82–94). Others have contextualized the opposition, stressing its roots in Althusser's immediate struggles inside the French Communist Party and within Marxism generally against what he opposed as the Hegelian forms of the rejection of Stalinism and economic determinism (Elliott 1987, 41–48, 72–84). What has been missing is a direct effort to explore the positive relevance of at least certain interpretations of Hegel and especially of his *Logic* (e.g., Winfield 1990) to Althusser's work and to contemporary developments based upon it.

In the pages immediately after the passage quoted above, Althusser barely begins the positive elaboration of Hegel's relevance to his own project and to antiessentialism generally. Our point here is to take the elaboration further in a particular way, a way Althusser hinted at but never pursued. The hint came in the form of the link he suggested between Hegel's *Logic*—its notion of all origins as at once affirmed and denied—and Derrida's notion of erasure (Althusser 1972, 184).

2. Such arguments have arisen repeatedly among the methodologically self-conscious across the disciplines and especially among the diverse social critics who have understood that theories are always forms of active intervention in society. That essentialist modes of thinking are sometimes important critical positions to take in particular historical settings has been argued cogently by Smith (1988, chap. 9) and Fuss (1989), both of whom are antiessentialist in general orientation.

3. One rich source for these developments may be found in many articles and their bibliographies published in the journal *Rethinking Marxism* since its inception in 1988.

thought supported the reproduction of unacceptable social institutions. Thus, institutions such as the patriarchal family or the capitalist enterprise were often justified and thereby strengthened by their claims, for example, that they alone corresponded to "essential human nature" or that they alone were essential means to achieve some social good.⁴ The essentialist arguments within these justifications seemed appropriate and necessary objects of criticism. Antiessentialist theorists could thus join the resistance to such institutions and advance the desired social transformations by attacking, deconstructing, and critically denigrating essentialist theories per se as well as the apologetic justifications they inform.

Althusser attacked essentialism along two fronts: in epistemology and in social theory. On the one hand, with his debts to Hegel clearly evident, he offered a powerful critique of empiricist, positivist, and rationalist epistemologies as founded on an essentialist separation of being and thought and on an absolutist notion of truth as their singular reconnection.⁵ On the other hand, from his earliest writings he attacked the kinds of explanations for social events that presumed, then searched for, and so invariably found their essential ("last instance") cause or causes: "From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (1963, 113).⁶

However, Althusser also took some crucial initial steps in constructing a positive alternative to essentialist modes of thought, namely, his particular formulation of overdetermination (Resnick and Wolff 1987, 81–106). Here

4. Virtually every status quo attempts to ground and secure itself by means of an essentialism. For example, consider the classic study of Latour and Woolgar (1979). A status quo proposition in biology is shown to have begun and to remain as but one among alternative, equally plausible hypotheses generated in a laboratory. However, in the specific context of struggle among the scientists advocating these different hypotheses, one group and their hypothesis "win" in the sense of becoming "the received wisdom." Thereupon, they convert their hypothesis from being one among many "truths" into the singular, essential "truth of nature." A biological status quo thereby grounds and secures itself upon an essentialism. Another example, currently widespread, holds that among alternative modes of economic organization (capitalist, socialist, feudal, etc.) one is necessitated as the "most efficient." Here, efficiencies (plural), instead of being alternatively conceptualized and correspondingly measured economic indices, become instead one essential, universal, absolute standard. The efficiency standard defined and elaborated within one system—capitalist—claims for itself the role as sole, independent arbiter among alternative economic systems. Needless to add, capitalism emerges as "most efficient" by this, its own, standard. Its supporters everywhere find this argument utterly persuasive.

5. In the *Phenomenology* and again in the *Logic*, Hegel insists on the transformations worked on any and all possible objects of thought by the thought processes themselves (Hegel 1931, 140–45; 1969, 43–50). Althusser has worked on these arguments of Hegel at least as much as on those of Marx and Engels, to which he refers when he elaborates his thesis that "knowledge of reality changes something in reality" (1976, 194–95).

6. Althusser wavered in this attack and adopted some essentialist explanations along the way (e.g., Althusser and Balibar 1970, 224). His commingling of essentialism and the breakthrough to overdetermination is analyzed in Resnick and Wolff (1987, 81–106).

the debt to Hegel—as the source of certain "generalities" upon which a Marxist transformation had to be worked—was again substantial and acknowledged, especially in relation to Althusser's famous concept of history as a dense network of overdeterminations, "a process without a subject" (1972, 170–86). That concept holds that every aspect of history—an individual, an event, a social movement, and so on—is constituted by all the other aspects of the social and natural totality within which it occurs. It has its existence (and each specific quality of that existence) only insofar as it is overdetermined in and through (constituted by) the relations that bind it to them all. The logic of overdetermined constitutivity displaces that of causes and their effects.⁷

As has been argued elsewhere (Resnick and Wolff 1987, chaps. 1 and 2), overdetermination implies that whatever exists does so in process of change. This universality of change is simply another way of stating that overdetermination entails contradiction. Any existent, being overdetermined, is the site of an infinity of determinations from all its overdeterminants (i.e., all other existents, present and past, within its social and natural totality). It is contradictory in the precise sense of its being "pushed" and "pulled" in an endless array of different directions by all its overdeterminants. This contradictoriness of any existent impels it to change (i.e., makes every existent a process), which thereby alters how it overdetermines all other existents. The contradictions characteristic of these "other" existents are thus altered as well, provoking new changes via endless ramifications in all directions. This, in any case, is the radical sense we make of Althusser's breakthrough usage of "overdetermination."

Now, such a concept of overdetermination may be understood to imply that explanations of social and natural events must demonstrate the constitution of those events by *all* the relations, spatial and temporal, in which they exist.⁸ However, this is clearly impossible. The number of such relations is infinite, and they are ceaselessly changing. What, then, can explanation—especially overdeterminist explanation—possibly mean?

The history of human efforts at explanation displays two broad sorts of presumptions about what explanation can (and should) be. Confronting the dauntingly infinite and fleeting factors that might possibly be conceived to constitute or cause the existence of any object of explanation, most people

7. It also displaces, for much the same reasons, the notion of explanation as a reduction of complex entities ("wholes") to *some* among their component parts, rank-ordered as essential vis-à-vis other parts, which are demoted from consideration as inessential. However, in this chapter, attention focuses on the contrast between the essentialism of cause-and-effect logics and the alternative of overdeterminist constitutivity.

8. Of course, among such events is the "finding of a truth" in and by the various theoretical frameworks that arise, change, and die in history. Such truths are as overdetermined as any other social events.

have responded with essentialisms. That is, they have structured their explanatory strategies around the following idea: one or a few essential causes lie within, at the bottom, beneath, or behind what is viewed as a merely "apparent" multiplicity of conceivable causes.⁹ With such "surface versus depth" or "appearance versus reality" metaphors as their premises, they have proceeded to search for and then proclaim "the correct" essential causes that they have "found." Beyond rank-ordering the effectivities of causes, essentialist explanation also included (a) justifying the privileged rank accorded to the "essential" causes by showing the "scientific" procedure used to find them and (b) demonstrating the precise mechanisms whereby they were effective.

Such procedures of thought entail an epistemological problem: how can their proponents be sure that they have found or pinpointed the "correct" essential cause(s) and described "accurately" how it (they) caused the events thereby explained.¹⁰ Empiricism, positivism, and rationalism have long contested for pride of place as the solution to this epistemological problem.¹¹ Each of these epistemological approaches presumes that a singular essential truth lies within, at the bottom, beneath, or behind the merely apparent multiplicity of contesting truth claims. In short, essentialist explanations of the causes of their objects have usually been accompanied by essentialist epistemological claims about *the* truth of their explanations. Marxists have been as resourceful as non-Marxists in fashioning, elaborating, and using such essentialist protocols to establish as absolute the different truths they have championed.

While the overwhelmingly prevalent definitions and strategies of explanation have been essentialist, a growing minority has been antiessentialist. Its very different explanatory presumption has held that the causes of any possible object of thought are irreducibly multiple, to infinity, and cannot be comparatively rank-ordered as to their effectivities. Thus, *no* explanation can come close to grasping the infinity of causal relations constituting any object. The essentialist belief that its explanations can grasp the infinity, because it is governed by a finite (indeed, quite small) *essential* subset of causal relations at its core, is rejected.

For antiessentialists, explanation refers to an exercise in which a very few of the infinite causes of any object are connected to it as contributory factors. It follows that the number of possible explanations is thus also infinite and that each particular explanation is unavoidably partial. Truth, in the sense of a singular comprehensive explanation, is a concept that can exist only within an essentialist framework. For antiessentialists, there are instead truths—

9. With more or less philosophical qualification, they adopt and deploy cause-and-effect logic.

10. Rorty (1979) captures this "accurate description" fetish with his metaphor of "mirroring."

11. None of these "solutions" can escape confronting again the problem of explanation. They must explain the processes of "finding a truth" so as to warrant belief in the "right" one.

plural—alternative explanations, each of which grasps parts of the infinitely complex linkages among possible objects of thought.

From such antiessentialist positions, Althusser and others have criticized essentialist explanations as actually quite partial and relative despite their claims to the contrary. They have deconstructed all rank orderings of the effectivities of causes to expose how they omit and render invisible certain dimensions and factors. They have delighted in demonstrating why and how those factors' pertinencies are reasonable to suppose, highly problematic to deny, and provocative of all sorts of promising research programs.

Nor has antiessentialism shied away from the next step: to infer from the exposed partiality of essentialist explanations what additional motives—other than the search for essential truth—may shape their particular rank orderings. Marxists could thus stress the stunning absence of class processes as factors in essentialist explanations; feminists could do likewise for gender, and others for racism, homophobia, and so on. Antiessentialism made visible the essentialism and particularity of all traditional (i.e., essentialist) cause-and-effect arguments. In this way, their claims to be the truth (singular), to objectivity or universality, were undercut.

However, when the focus shifted to trying to fashion antiessentialist explanations, in place of the discredited essentialist alternatives, the questions and doubts arose. To counterpose an antiessentialist to an essentialist explanation brings forward again the basic impossibility of doing so. Will not any antiessentialist have to focus on but *some* of the aspects pertinent to the explanation of any event? And will not that focus amount to (i.e., look remarkably like) a kind of explanatory essentializing of those aspects? Does the self-qualification of such antiessentialist analyses as making no claim to "full explanation" do anything very significant to distinguish them from the essentialist analyses they so sharply criticize because they make no such self-qualification?

Reworking Althusser's formulation of overdetermination by means of Hegel's notions of being and contradiction offers, I believe, a satisfactory response to these questions. However, it does so by refusing or at least radically recasting the concept of explanation itself. As we shall see, explanation gives way to the differently directed notions of "alternative interventions" or "taking positions" or, more simply, "telling stories."

Hegel's famous opening paragraphs on "Determinate Being" in his *Logic* (1969, 109–10) can set the tone for a Hegelian rethinking and extension of the Althusserian breakthrough to overdetermination. Overdetermination can thus be reformulated as containing, initially, its own negation, namely, an essentialism. To begin an overdeterminist explanation immediately involves its own negation in the form of an essentialist argument. One has to begin someplace and somehow to connect any object of explanation to its context or environment. That, after all, is what it means to "explain" that object. No other way to

begin explanation is possible. But this beginning moment, the particular initial someplace and somehow of explanation, is a kind of precisely momentary essentialization. It is a momentary affirmation of a priority within the web of interacting aspects of any totality.¹²

To set out to construct overdeterminist analysis entails, then, immediately and unavoidably, its own annulment by an initial essentialist moment. The form of that moment is the formulation of an argument specifically connecting some social aspects that condition an object's existence to that existence. Since such connecting necessarily excludes the infinite mediating factors that impinge on the connection, an essentialist moment of explanation is in play. Yet this essentialist moment, insofar as it figures within an overdeterminist explanation, is a *determinate* negation of that perspective and thus dependent on it. Moreover, the essentialist moment will, in turn, be negated or annulled by overdetermination in a rather classic Hegelian rhythm.

To sketch such an overdeterminist explanation briefly, consider an initial momentary essentialism followed by these sequential steps. First, the caveat is articulated that the momentary essentialism is just that: an initial approach to the object of explanation that relates it to a subset of its overdeterminants. Next, a second subset of its overdeterminants is explored both in terms of its connection to the object of explanation *and also in terms of how its inclusion in the explanation changes the relation posed in the initial essentialism*. In other words, each essentialist moment is understood to be true—it illuminates a connection—and false—it obscures other connections that, if and when considered, will show all previously elaborated connections to have been true and false in this sense. There is no completion or closure to this process of explanation. Each essentialist moment, necessary for any overdeterminist explanation, is also necessarily negated by the selfsame overdeterminist quality of such explanation. Overdeterminist explanation is this sequence of moments.

A certain Hegelian quality of this reading of Althusser's notion of overdetermination may be indicated by reference to the *Logic*. There Hegel insists that "it is not, so to speak, a blemish, an imperfection or a defect in something if a contradiction can be pointed out in it" (1969, 442). Attempts to avoid contradictions within explanation are thus what Hegel here rejects as "ordinary thinking."¹³ Instead, overdeterminist explanation exemplifies Hegel's

12. The essentialist quality of this prioritized moment remains a problem even if we recognize the important distinction between prioritizing concepts in a discourse and claiming any priority among the objects of such a discourse (Hindess and Hirst 1977). That is, antiessentialists can rightly claim that their emphases on particulars as essential to their explanations are *not* equivalent to an argument that those particulars have any essential causative role in the objective world. However, that still leaves intact the essentialist moment of their explanations—to which my argument here is directed.

13. Such ordinary thinking "stops short at the one-sided *resolution* of [contradiction] into *nothing*, and fails to recognize the positive side of contradiction where it becomes *absolute*

idea of a "unity of distinguished and distinguishable moments, which . . . pass over into contradictory moments" (1969, 442). Such explanation can thus be seen as "inherently self-contradictory, but it is no less the *contradiction resolved*" (1969, 442; emphasis in original).

Indeed, it is this kind of contradictory quality of the essentialist moment that distinguishes it from essentialist arguments not situated within overdeterminist perspectives. The essentialist's stories are not moments generated by, standing in contradiction to, and in turn generating an overdeterminist problematic. They are not moments presented and justified in some self-conscious dialectic of affirmation and negation. They are not presented as true *and* false, but true *or* false. They are not presented as partisan yet open processes of change, but rather as nonpartisan, closed fixities resisting change.¹⁴

Consider, for example, essentialist explanations such as (1) women have certain qualities different from men, and these differences are determined by biology/nature; or (2) national balance of payments deficits are caused chiefly by internationally different interest rates. Both essentialist explanations aim to bring closure to the questions to which they respond. Whatever aspects of society are absent from or relatively marginalized within these explanations are deemed irrelevant or relatively inconsequential to answering the questions. The absences and marginalizations are not recognized as problems, as signs of the particularity, partiality, and partisanship of the explanation. In essentialist explanation, there is no necessary component of justifying the exclusion of dimensions other than those essentialized on the grounds, say, of the social and political contexts and goals of the explainer and the explanation. Rather, the absences and marginalizations are rendered as absolutes, valid universally for all, rankings in the nature of objective reality rather than in the particular approach to reality of the theorist. What essentialists exclude in their explanations is not a problem posed for them to justify from a partisan position; it is rather a solution, beyond all partisanship, that they have found.¹⁵

activity" (1969, 442; emphasis in original). The "absolute activity" here is like what we mean by the process of overdeterminist explanation.

14. Thus, for essentialists, affirming the "truth" of an explanation, say, of "x," represents precisely the hope that it will resist being changed (i.e., undermined) by considering any new possible factors of "x." Resisting change under such circumstances is not only possible for them, it constitutes "verification." If change cannot be avoided, that constitutes "falsification." This is, of course, the classic confrontation of contradiction and noncontradiction, here applied to epistemology and methodology.

15. This point stands whether or not the particular essentialist explanation is offered with the caveat that as yet uninvestigated factors might, upon investigation, alter that explanation. There are always *some* factors that the essentialist has investigated and then rejected, as secondary or irrelevant, from the explanation offered. That move, the absolute ranking of particular aspects of totalities as invisible or but dimly visible, is what constitutes essentialism. That move dissolves the qualitatively different factors and their qualitatively different constitutive effects upon what is to be explained. In place of qualitative diversity—itsself an infinity—we have the reduction to

In contrast, consider an antiessentialist explanation that begins with an initial essentialist moment, for example, formulating a causal connection between the class structures of households and the concept of female. This initial essentialist connection, admittedly particular, must be justified vis-à-vis what is excluded from it. Thus, for example, a Marxist overdeterminist might argue that because explanations of the social construction of the concept of female have omitted the role of household class structures in the construction, a Marxist contribution properly begins with an explanation of that causal connection. The overdeterminist Marxist explanation thus acknowledges and justifies its particularity—indeed, its incompleteness—as *part of the explanation itself*. It is thus radically open to an engagement with alternatively particular theories; its own mode of explanation drives it to find a way to process—that is, integrate into its own explanations—the arguments of particular others.¹⁶

To turn the logic of overdetermination reflexively back on itself, explanation, from this perspective, is overdetermined and thus contradictory. Its contradictory presences and absences impel it forward. Explanation is an endless process of change; each formulated explanation is a contradictory moment in that process. Explanations are thus all rather fragile and evanescent. (From an overdeterminist standpoint, essentialist explanations, too, change ceaselessly; however, they conceive the process very differently, as one of truth displacing error rather than alternative explanations interacting with and transforming one another.)

The fragility of explanation, to bring Hegel in again—and now Marx, Lenin, and Althusser, too—is also a kind of strength. Just because overdeterminist explanation admits that it excludes at every step, it must offer a justification for doing so. Why are “the excluded” aspects left out of the essentialist connections ventured as sequential steps in antiessentialist theorizing? It is not possible to answer this question, as essentialists do, by reference to an absolute standard of causal effectiveness, one that legitimates—across all theories—the excluding of the “nonessential” from explanations. Instead, for overdeterminists, the answer to this question is to acknowledge and defend a partisan position taken toward the process and object of explanation themselves.¹⁷

monological, purely quantitative ranking that reaches the conclusion that some few are the *most* important causes or dimensions of the merely apparent qualitative diversity of all causes. The fetishization of mathematics is therewith enabled.

16. Of course, whether, when, and how the proponent of such an overdeterminist Marxist explanation would engage alternative explanations would depend on the specifics of time and place. The point here is to stress how such explanation invites and implies such engagement, whereas essentialist explanation renders it absurd or else views it as a contest over which explanation is the “correct” one.

17. This is part of what I think Althusser is gesturing toward in his discussion of Lenin’s advocacy of partisanship in philosophy (1971, 60–67).

The answer is that *any and all* explanations advanced are interventions in particular conjunctures, in particular sets of social and natural conditions. They are interventions with particular purposes—political, cultural, and economic changes—in their conjunctures. Within overdeterminist explanation, these purposes are part of the self-conscious, explicit justification of the essentialist moment, of that particular aspect of a complex totality that is given momentary priority. Indeed, from the perspective of overdetermination, there is an insistence that *all* explanations ever offered, both essentialist and overdeterminist, display essentialist moments that were shaped, in part, by particular interventionist purposes, whether or not these were conscious, understood, or admitted. For overdeterminist Marxism, such purposes are intrinsic to all explanations, constitutive overdeterminants of them all.

Thus, the overdeterminist critique of essentialism holds, first, that the latter’s explanations presume that they can and do censor out most or all of such purposiveness, which overdetermination believes to be impossible.¹⁸ Second, since essentialists do not recognize their purposiveness and the partisan positions they take when they essentialize certain aspects of the totalities they seek to explain, they see no need to offer justifications in terms of purposes and partisanship. Indeed, they denounce such justifications as opposed or irrelevant to true explanation. Theirs is instead the search for “truth” in all its purity, objectivity, and absoluteness. If they admit any purpose or any partisanship, it, too, must be absolute, for *the* truth, “above” all other “lower” purposes and partisanship.¹⁹

Overdeterminist theories display essentialist moments, but precisely because those moments arise and vanish within an overdeterminist perspective, they must acknowledge and thereby make present that which is absent, the excluded overdeterminants. In so doing, overdeterminist theories must as well justify the particular present/absent configuration of their interventions. Marxist overdeterminists, for example, must construct within their interventions a political (in the broadest sense) component that justifies their particular intervention and criticizes the contesting interventions.

The antiessentialist critique of essentialist interventions proceeds on two levels, the first enabling the second. First, it is a critique of the essentialist

18. Popper (quoted in Adorno et al. 1976, 94–98) did admit a purpose for science, namely, separating “purely scientific values and disvalues and extra-scientific values and disvalues” (emphasis in original). Admitting this purpose amounts to seeking to avoid the partisan purposiveness that overdetermination sees as (1) impossible to avoid and (2) generative of the differences that provoke the “progress” and transformations that thinking contributes to historical change.

19. Here again, note the essentialist transformation: from qualitative differences among alternative purposes in explanations to quantitative rankings of them as more or less true, objective, adequate, and so on. This contrast parallels Rorty’s (1979) dichotomy between philosophy that converses and philosophy that mirrors, although Rorty cannot cope with Marxism of any kind and hence cannot learn from its critiques of mirroring.

story on the grounds, as noted above, that it is partial yet claims to be complete and is usually closed, that it is precisely essentialist and *as such* contributes to specific social effects depending on its conjunctural context. The second critique holds that the essentialist story is partial in a particular way, that it has a particular configuration of what is present/absent among the factors or aspects that it ventures to connect to its object of explanation. This second critique specifies how the essentialist story's particular partiality likewise contributes to specific social effects depending on the conjunctural context.

Here, then, lies the difference between the essentialist moment of an overdeterminist argument and essentialist arguments not located within an overdeterminist perspective. Overdeterminist theory recognizes, engages, and justifies its own contradiction (it is essentialist *and* antiessentialist), whereas essentialist theory does not. The former copes with this contradiction by articulating a hope and intent that its explicit antiessentialism and its particular configuration of present/absent relations will contribute to different and preferred social consequences as compared to those of the theories it opposes. This, as Althusser puts it in his interpretation of Lenin, is a matter of theory acknowledging its partisan politics. Marxist overdeterminist explanations entail a necessary political justification that draws its audiences into discourse (and perhaps other actions) about the social overdeterminations and effects of explanations.

For many Marxist overdeterminists this means that their interventions not only must exemplify overdetermination (make visible their exclusions) but also must stress or at least include class processes. The intended social effects include stimulating the awareness of (1) what is at stake in the determinism versus overdetermination alternative, (2) the relevance to all social issues of alternative class structures (making them a present rather than an absent element in social analysis and action), and (3) why either overdetermination or class or both are absent from other interventions. Because essentialists are not committed to and do not reason within overdeterminist problematics, their essentialist interventions do not share such agendas and are therefore different interventions.

Having worked certain Hegelian generalities on Althusser's idea of overdetermination, we must confront its resulting fragility and openness. The very notion of explanation seems to dissolve. For every aspect of explanation seems to become unhooked from every other. Why does someone with an overdeterminist perspective/commitment venture to connect this set of factors with an object of explanation rather than some other set within the infinity of possible sets? The only answer, the only explanation of any specific connection, is to set out to explain all of its overdeterminants. Here lies an endless regress. Or consider why one essentialist moment of an overdeterminist

explanation has this as opposed to that effect on subsequent moments of that explanation. Again, the only answer is another layer of overdetermined explanation and the abyss of infinite regress. The ceaselessly changing extra-theoretical and extradiscursive overdeterminants of each moment in the process of explanation, as well as the contradictory interactions among the moments, render the very notion of explanation no longer tenable.

The word *explain* is just too implicated in essentialist thought. It connotes fullness, completeness, fixity, closure, and the image of a statement about an object of interest that is not itself contradictory, particular, and evanescent. It should be displaced in favor of "intervention," "position," or "story."

Human beings intervene in social life in many ways. One way is by telling stories. These stories connect some aspects of social life with others. How these aspects arise as matters of interest and stimulate the stories that venture connections among them is overdetermined in ceaselessly changing ways across human history. The claim that any such story is more than a local intervention, that it is, rather, a global or universal truth about how the world is, qualifies the story as essentialist rather than antiessentialist. Such claims are themselves positions, interventions, and stories intended to achieve specific conjunctural effects.

The point is that such essentialist stories have different effects upon the societies in which they occur—including different effects upon all subsequent story-telling—from those of antiessentialist stories.²⁰ Given that the twentieth century's prevalent forms of Marxism have been essentialist (largely economic and/or political determinisms) and given my sense that often disastrous policies have been influenced or at least justified by them, I oppose essentialism and prefer overdetermination. The appeal of many strands within the tendencies grouped under the heading of postmodernism also plays a role. Given Marxism's critical revelation of the existence and social consequences of class (and of how forms of consciousness have blocked their recognition and thereby the needed social revolutions), I have found Althusser's efforts to combine overdetermination and Marxism a crucial beginning of theoretical tasks now to be achieved. No doubt I take this position for still other reasons, including many unknown to me. Demystifying "explanations" into story-telling hopes and aims for—and is itself part of—that rethinking and reconstruction of Marxian theories for which Althusser worked.

Moreover, the commitment to overdetermination entails a notion of ubiqui-

20. In overdeterminist theory, any initially ventured essentialist connection (or moment) is dissolved through the recognition of what it excludes, but it nonetheless leaves its trace upon all the next steps of overdeterminist theorizing. The essentialist moment and its antiessentialist dissolution each participates (plays its role) in overdetermining the other. The traces they leave represent the presence inside overdeterminist reasoning of a relation of overdetermination among its own component elements.

tous contradiction that requires one always to recognize that a story told will affect—as will any social event—all other events, which in turn will affect all others in a ramifying profusion of interactions. Hence, no certainty is possible as to how all this will eventuate in terms of its social effects. Rather, it is probable that the social consequences of telling a particular story, including any overdeterminist one, will have contradictory effects, some positive and some negative from the perspective of the teller.

It makes no sense, from the overdeterminist perspective, to seek guarantees of the results of telling any particular story. You make your partial analysis of an event and its context. You try to anticipate how different stories will, if told, affect society. Out of these raw materials (and others you are more or less aware of), you tell your story and hope that it will ramify in positive ways that are more gratifying than the negative ways are distressing.

Thus, from an overdeterminist perspective, no claim can be made that essentialist stories will always have negative rather than positive social effects. Such a claim would establish an essentialist connection independent of context—just what the commitment to overdetermination resists. The concern is thus expressed among overdeterminists that there may well be circumstances in which they prefer the social effects they anticipate from essentialist stories over those they anticipate from antiessentialist stories. The concept of overdetermination, as I have argued it, certainly implies such a possibility. In such circumstances, different stories will be told. For example, the story told in this essay would likely not have been written. This raises problems neither for the concept of overdetermination nor for a commitment to use it in explanation, if overdetermination is understood via the Hegelian reworking of Althusser's Marxism attempted here.

My conclusion holds overdeterminist analysis to be that particular kind of story-telling that advances and annuls successive essentialist moments in ways systematically different from what is done by essentialist storytellers. In the flux of ever-changing social contexts, a commitment to overdetermination enables different explanations with different social consequences from the currently prevalent array of essentialist explanations. The essentialist moments within overdeterminist explanations, constructed as such by the interventions of Hegel, Marx, and Althusser, exemplify those differences. They also, I believe, offer an answer to the self-questioning and doubts raised among those pursuing the Marxian project of overdeterminist explanation.

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The New Marxian Political Economy and the Contribution of Althusser

The social transformations in the former USSR and throughout Eastern Europe have reinforced the profound reexaminations and rethinkings of Marxian economics that have been underway since the late 1960s. Indeed, the confluence of the political and economic upheavals in Eastern Europe, the "crises" (Althusser's term) of Marxism in other parts of the world, and the broad postmodernist challenge to modernist ways of thought across the disciplines and across the globe have combined to yield an explosive transformation within the Marxian tradition. Althusser might have said that these factors were helping to "overdetermine" the transformation of Marxism. In this process, hitherto dominant theories have been increasingly on the defensive, especially those articulated as economic or political determinisms. Formerly marginalized tendencies are trying to take their place. And new directions are fitfully taking shape in what is now a time of intense theoretical struggle among the diverse tendencies within Marxism.

The contradictions of the Soviet and Soviet-inspired interpretations of both socialism and Marxism prompted many of Althusser's most important interventions. Likewise, the collapse of Soviet forms of socialism and Marxism are now shaping many of the new directions in Marxian economics. Some of these reject or ignore Althusser's work. Others, including our own, build upon it as a central contribution. Indeed, we see Althusser's critical engagements with official Marxism as having yielded a framework that is indispensable for achieving not only a new Marxist critique of bourgeois social development

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but also a critical evaluation of the Soviet experience. Like Marx's and then Lenin's critical evaluations of the successes and failures of an earlier epochal experiment in socialism, the Paris Commune, Althusser's work enables a comparable "drawing of lessons" from the Soviet experiment, lessons necessary for all future struggles to supplant capitalism with socialism. Toward the end of this chapter, we return to the ways in which the new Marxian political economy, built upon Althusser's contributions, is reevaluating the Soviet experience.

Althusser's critiques of determinism in social theory and in epistemology and his introduction of an alternative, overdetermination, raise basic epistemological questions about the nature of Marxist theory *as theory* as well as basic questions about the logic and central concepts—above all, class—of Marxist social analysis. Those Marxist political economists who have taken up the challenge to answer these basic questions find that the systematic elaboration of overdetermination not only reformulates Marxian theory but also opens it up to an intense new interaction with the other kinds of social criticism that capitalism is now provoking. As these are pursued, new linkages and alliances are being forged between Marxists and those elements in the feminist, postmodernist, environmentalist, and other movements who are likewise critical of basic dimensions of contemporary society and interested in alliances for social change. The engagement of the new Marxist political economy, described below, with the contributions of Althusser is thus motivated by their usefulness in constructing such alliances as well as in drawing Marxist lessons from the Soviet experiment and intervening in the current crises and transformations of Marxism.

Of course, the new directions being taken by Marxist theories are several and diverse. Marxian economics, for example, has been taken by one new movement toward a remarkable merger with individualist social theory and neoclassical economics. This "methodological individualist" or "analytical" Marxist group recoils at what it sees as the holistic or "Hegelian" approach of traditional Marxian economics. Analytical Marxists reject as "wrong" the traditional stress on the macroeconomic foundations and imperatives (e.g., capital accumulation) that determine both individuals' behaviors within capitalism and the historical path of capitalism as a system.¹ Instead, they counterpropose a *microfoundations* approach, rooting their new Marxian economics henceforth in individuals' constrained maximizations of their various individual objectives. These maximizing strategies are then aggregated to determine the macrolevel functioning and history of capitalism. While new,

1. See especially Roemer (1981, 1982, 1986) but also Elster (1985, 1986). Critical assessments by more traditional Marxists may be found in Levine, Sober, and Wright (1987) and Lebowitz (1988). Critiques from perspectives related to our own may be found in Ruccio (1988), Cullenberg (1988), and Amariglio, Callari, and Cullenberg (1989).

"analytical Marxism" remains a thoroughly modernist Marxian economics, in individual maximization it has found the essential key to—essence or master narrative of—the deep structure or logic that governs the surface-level complexities of the economy as a whole.

A second major new direction for Marxian economics breaks not only from the macroeconomic foundationalism of traditional Marxism but also rejects the equally deterministic, if opposite, microfoundationalism of the analytical school. It is distinctively postmodernist.² Against all determinism, it proceeds on a radically antideterminist basis. It refuses to reduce economic development to any one factor, neither individual maximizations nor capital accumulation nor technological change. Instead of reductionism or its twin, determinism, this approach operates on the basis of overdetermination: hence, its indebtedness to Althusser.

Althusser's path-breaking essay, "Overdetermination and Contradiction" (1970a), and his later elaborations of that work (1970b, 1972) enabled a new formulation of Marxist social theory. Among economists responding to Althusser's breakthrough what emerged was another new Marxian economics—a new kind of Marxian class analysis. This new Marxian economics has motivated a rapidly growing group of Marxist thinkers, in the United States especially and reaching well beyond the disciplinary boundaries of "economics" (Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff 1990). The quarterly journal *Rethinking Marxism*, founded in 1988, is a major (although not the only) current locus of such work.

The changes in Eastern Europe have served to underline the relevance of Althusser's critique of determinist thought and practice. Those changes dramatize the profound costs of policies and practices based upon the kinds of Marxist theory that make ownership of productive property (private vs. state) the determinant or essence of socialism versus capitalism. They likewise serve to question those parallel kinds of Marxist theory that make planning the *essential determinant*, versus markets. In our view, the changes go further and press us to return to Althusser's quest to break Marxism out of *any* focus on one or another factor as the determinant of socialism (or of anything else). They require us to recommence his effort to recognize and build upon Marx's own moves to break from determinism *per se* as a necessary part of the break from bourgeois society, including its philosophical biases (such as determinisms of all sorts). In what follows, we sketch the nature of such a critical

2. In our view, Marxism has become yet another agonistic field where modernist and postmodernist propositions contest. Indeed, we see postmodernism as quite comparable in that it has become a field where opponents struggle over whether to take it in Marxian or non-Marxian directions. Just as modernist Marxists resist but cannot prevent the growth of postmodern Marxist theories, so anti-Marxist postmodernists resist but cannot prevent the growth of Marxist postmodernisms.

return and its implications for a new and postmodern Marxian political economy.

I. Althusser's Project

During the 1980s, Marxists questioned the Althusserian project as intensely as they had earlier celebrated it. Ideas taken to be of extraordinary importance in the 1960s and 1970s were then temporarily relegated to secondary intellectual status or dismissed altogether. It was said that although Althusserian notions of overdetermination and contradiction were compelling abstractly, they seemed impossible to apply to concrete political and theoretical activity. Indeed, first Althusser's work and then Marxism more generally had to face a common complaint from former devotees: neither seemed to be adequate to the promises and hopes of the 1960s. Althusser's work, much like that of Marx, seemed to many to have been superseded by events. However, we disagree.

In *Reading Capital* (1970b), Althusser had suggested that there are many ways to read Marx. There turn out to be as well many ways to read Althusser. The Althusser that we read has presented us with a very useful legacy, namely, some powerful new concepts enabling new departures in social theory generally and in economic analysis in particular.

For us, Althusser's work is one of the greatest contributions in the Marxian tradition. His legacy is a profound critique of all determinisms by means of his new concepts of overdetermination and contradiction (new "readings" of Marx, as he put it). His critique sweeps away the determinisms that have haunted Marxism heretofore: the recurring debates between structuralism and humanism in its social theory and those between rationalism and empiricism in its epistemology. His critique thus permits a new kind of rethinking of Marxism. Marxism may now finally be liberated from the conservatism implied and reinforced by these determinist forms of thought. To use another current idiom, Marxism can now shift from its traditional modernist forms to new postmodernist formulations.

Evidence that others have made at least partly similar readings of Althusser exists in certain contemporary trends among Marxian theorists. It has become obligatory for many Marxists to affirm, in one way or another, a principled rejection of determinism in all its guises: economic determinism, structuralism, humanism, historicism, empiricism, rationalism, positivism, and foundationalism. Yet despite such affirmations, most Marxist discourses find it difficult and ultimately unacceptable to formulate consistently nondeterminist arguments. They thus commingle determinist with antideterminist formulations in paradoxical, contradictory discourses, inviting both criticism and resolution, including that offered below.

II. A Marxian Paradox

How can we account for this paradox? Part of the explanation lies in the resistance of Marxists to what they understand, consciously or unconsciously, to be the unacceptable logical implications of the Althusserian critique of determinism. There is the difficulty of breaking Marxist theory from the direct link to (grasp or reflection of) "material reality" that it had been presumed to have. There was a sense of groundedness, of a firm foundation, that is offered by connecting theoretical argument to some determinate essence, whether it be that posed in either humanist or structuralist theorizing about society or that offered in either empiricist or rationalist thinking about knowledge. To lose this foundation (or the certitude that its affirmation conveys) represents a terrifying glimpse into an abyss in which the very possibility of explanation per se seems to dissolve. In this sense, Althusser's contribution was too radical even for those committed to all sorts of other radicalisms.

Moreover, in a world of ideas and actions now cast adrift from any guaranteeing anchors or determining foundations, all theories and political movements become merely different from one another, alternative stories or accounts of social life. For traditional Marxists, such a conclusion confirms their worst fears, for it admits a theoretical and political pluralism in which struggle over any nonclass part of life makes as much sense as struggle over class. A rejection of determinism, whether in the first or last instance, carries with it, then, the worrisome implication that the class (economic) contradictions are no longer even ultimately determinant. Marx's notion of class struggle between capitalists and workers over the means of production or the labor process or the appropriation of surplus value seems to lose its privileged historic and theoretical place as essential historical determinant (or "motor"). It becomes at best merely one among many different struggles, including those over the rights of women, racial or ethnic or religious minorities, gays, the poor, the homeless, and so on. For the determinist Marxist, this is a pluralism that has run amok.

The Althusserian critique also implies that Marxist theory itself can no longer be held up as a science (absolute) and non-Marxian theories as ideology (merely relative). No longer, then, can historical facticity reveal the truth of Marxism versus other theories, as empiricists so fervently wish to believe. Neither can the texts of Marx provide that single theory that captures History in thought, as rationalists so intensely affirm. All we have instead are merely different forms of thinking, different theories, with their correspondingly different truth criteria; intertheoretical standards of truth are not admitted. For epistemological determinists, who believe that truth is singular (absolute) rather than plural (relative), this is a nightmare. It not only demotes

Marxism as a privileged theory, but it also opens a door to "irrationality" posing as simply another theory. First an unwanted political and then an equally intolerable theoretical pluralism seem to have been unleashed by the Althusserian critique of determinist thinking.³ The confrontation between modernist and postmodernist Marxism is thus engaged.

Althusser's work itself was hardly immune from this paradox. His epistemological lapse into the ideology and science dichotomy, on the one hand, and his affirmation of determination in the last instance by the economy, on the other, suggest to us an unwillingness finally to free his own texts from determinist thinking. Like many others who affirm the importance of the critique of determinism, he too seems to have shied away from the consequences of its logic for his own work. His contradictory attempt to hold onto determinism while simultaneously casting it out parallels the tendencies of so many other Marxists to readmit into their own work the very determinisms they claim to reject.⁴

It is no great surprise then to discover in the work of many current Marxists the return of the determinisms of Jeremy Bentham and Max Weber to play the part of Althusser's "lonely hour of the last instance." The calculus of pleasure in the formal guise of a given human agency returns as an ultimate determinant (last instance) of the economy in the "analytical Marxism" mentioned above. The calculus of ownership rights and political authority in both structuralist and humanist forms returns in the work of more traditional Marxist and radical theorists who make the distribution of power (more or less "democracy") the essential determinant of economic and social change.

We think that a radically different alternative to these determinisms is possible for Marxists. It is one that accepts the Althusserian critique of determinism but also extends it beyond his boundaries. It embraces rather than fears the systematic rejection of determinism because it sees in all determinisms a common goal of conserving from change some form of experience, thought, or part of society. In this precise sense, what Althusser accomplished was of extraordinary importance, for he provided the tools to recognize and

3. There is an arresting parallel between Althusser's overdeterminist challenge to determinist social theories and Copernicus's likewise overdeterminist challenge to Ptolemy's astronomy. Copernicus attacked the essentialism of an astronomy that made the earth *the* center, ground, and focus of the entire universe. Supporters of Ptolemy were horrified and outraged; they too were mindful of the religious and social-theoretic implications of understanding the earth as merely one of a vast plurality of planets grouped around a vast plurality of stars. Of course, overdeterminist theories are no more or less "scientific" than determinist theories, whether in social or natural analyses. They are alternative ways of making sense of their respective objects and have correspondingly different impacts on the societies in which they occur.

4. A fuller discussion of the details of Althusser's own wavering in his determinism-overdetermination and his science-ideology differentiations may be found in Resnick and Wolff (1987) and also in Amariglio (1987).

hopefully to challenge this conservative objective. Our task now is to justify this thesis.

III. Althusser's Critique of Marxism's Traditional Philosophy

Althusser clearly recognized and defined a basic philosophical problem within the Marxian tradition that he inherited and valued highly. The problem concerns the ways social entities are thought to stand in relation to one another. Traditional Marxism views given objects and events in society as interacting but also as either ultimately dependent or independent, as either fundamentally determining or determined. It aims to identify those aspects of society that are determining essences (the famous "last instance determinants"—the economic base, the mode of production, class struggle, etc.) and then to demonstrate the mechanisms whereby they determine all the other aspects of society (the political and cultural superstructure). In short, traditional Marxism operates within the framework of a clearly determinist (or essentialist) social theory. As Althusser reiterated, this Marxian commitment to determinist social theory imitated—and thus did not break from—the equally prevalent determinisms among non-Marxian social theories.

Traditional Marxism also operates within a clearly essentialist epistemology, which presented a parallel problem to Althusser. It presumes a fundamental dichotomy, or gap, between thought (ideas) and being (reality) such that the goal of all human thought is to produce the knowledge that bridges the presumed gap. Human thought strives to mirror, or "represent" accurately, the real world of being to which thought is directed. The key to (or foundation/guarantee of) a successful bridging—a "true" representation of how the real world actually is—lies in following one or both of the two classic protocols of determinist epistemology: empiricism or rationalism. In posing this as "the problem of knowledge"—how to establish the singular truth and distinguish it from falsehoods—traditional Marxism defines epistemological issues in exactly the foundational manner of the traditional bourgeois philosophy it ostensibly opposes. Not surprisingly, Marxism has found its way to the same two sorts of answers: empiricism or rationalism as foundations of truth.

For Althusser, both kinds of essentialism—in social theory and epistemology—were more than "problems" for Marxist theory. They had been imported into Marxism *without criticism* and transformation from the bourgeois philosophical tradition. They were fetters preventing Marxism from completing its break with the bourgeois tradition and thus from fulfilling its revolutionizing mission of establishing a philosophy and social theory for communism. Althusser set about to renew that mission by attacking essentialisms in epistemology and social theory as incompatible with Marxism.

The two key concepts for Althusser in his critical attack were overdetermination (counterposed to determination) and complex contradictions (counterposed to simple contradictions). He borrowed and adapted overdetermination from Freud (1950, 174–205) and combined it with Marx's philosophical formulations to define an alternative to determinist analyses of all sorts in social theory and in epistemology. Whereas the latter analyses presumed a notion of causation in which some entities determine others, Althusser insisted rather that no social entity (a person, a relationship, an institution, etc.) was ever determined by one or a subset of other social entities. Rather, each and every entity within society was always presumed to be determined by the effects of *all* the other entities at once. Stated otherwise, each entity was the product of the interaction of all the others. It was overdetermined by *all* those others, rather than being determined by any one or a subset of them.

Further, each social entity bears within itself the traces of all the other social entities that, together, are its overdeterminants. Indeed, each entity's existence is nothing other than the combined effects of all the others in the social totality.⁵ As such, each entity is the site of the different effectivities of all other social entities. An individual is the site, for example, of the effects of class, parents, jobs, religions, politics, literature, biology, and so on. So too is an enterprise, a literary text, or a political party. As such sites, each entity comprises or contains different effects that push and pull it in all directions with varying force.⁶

In this precise sense, Althusser refers to the contradictions within every entity as complex; they emanate from the influences exerted by *all* other entities. Instead of the dualistic (Althusser calls it "simple") notion of contradiction inherited from previous philosophy—the metaphor of positive and negative—Althusser counterposes the notion of overdetermination. Hence, infinitely complex contradictions constitute every social entity.

If every social entity is overdetermined by every other, it follows that Althusser is here posing nothing less than a new and different notion of causation. Each social entity is necessarily always both determining as well as determined. It is overdetermined by all other entities and participates in overdetermining every other entity within the social totality. Every entity in society exists as the site of the effects from all others; it is overdetermined and hence complexly contradictory.

Those influenced by Althusser have taken this argument another step. From

5. It is suggestive to note the parallel here with Einstein's famous 1905 proposal that all physical masses are forms of energy and that each particular quantum of energy (mass) in turn depends upon the interaction of all the others in the universe.

6. It is interesting that similar ways of formulating this idea have occurred in other disciplines: for example, the decentering of the individual self into a mass of contradictory selves and the deconstruction of a text into a mass of contradictory texts.

the overdetermination and contradictions of each social entity, we have derived the notion that all entities are in ceaseless change, since a change in any social entity alters the influence it exerts on (i.e., changes) all others. The image of Althusserian theory, then, is one of the ceaseless play of change in all entities. Everything exists in change. To signal this as a basic presumption of analysis, we have dropped the word *entity* and replaced it with the word *process* (Resnick and Wolff 1987). The social totality is conceived, then, as the set of all social processes. These are grouped, for expository ease, under four headings: natural, economic, political, and cultural processes. Natural processes refer to physical, chemical, and biological changes or transformations. Economic processes refer to all the changes occurring in the production and distribution of goods and services. Political processes refer to all the changes occurring in the ordering of individuals' interpersonal behaviors. Cultural processes refer to all the changes occurring in the production and dissemination of meanings in the society.

The process—the social entity existing in change—has become the basic element of our social analysis. Each process changes in particular ways and at a specific pace according to its unique overdetermination and contradictions. Moreover, these processes do not occur alone or by themselves in society; they occur in groups that comprise all the particular sites in society, such as a person, a relationship among persons, or an activity. It follows that every site in society is approached as precisely a grouping of distinct, constitutive processes. Moreover, since each process is understood as uniquely overdetermined and contradictory, it follows that all social sites, being composed of multiple social processes, are complex and contradictory. Since each of the distinct social processes comprising any site has its own overdetermined quality and pace of change, the site itself displays the uneven, differential movements of its components; it develops unevenly.⁷ For Althusser, as for Marx, the uneven development of all social sites was a basic premise of social analysis. The Althusserian concepts of overdetermination and complex contradiction, however, enable us to clarify and justify that premise more carefully and thoroughly than had been possible without those concepts.

IV. Overdetermination and Contradiction

The concept of overdetermination implies a Marxian understanding of the existence of all social sites that breaks fully from the prevalent, determinist

7. For a fuller explanation of how the categories of overdetermination and contradiction produce uneven development and for a critique of alternative conceptions of uneven development operating within Marxist social analyses, see McIntyre (1992).

notions that had characterized both Marxian and non-Marxian social theories. It also implies, as Althusser reiterated, a postmodern Marxian epistemology that breaks decisively from both empiricism and rationalism. This may be shown by noting that a theoretical commitment to overdetermination clearly imposes an immediate analytical problem. How can we explain any social site—a political movement, an enterprise, an individual, a morality—if by explanation we mean an account of how *all* other social processes interact to overdetermine the site in question? Such an exhaustive account exceeds human capability and would require so much time that the object of explanation would have changed beyond recognition and perhaps beyond any interest for us by the time the explanation was “complete.”

The answer to this problem is that one implication of the notion of overdetermination lies in the recognition that all explanations are inherently and unavoidably incomplete. All theories of society—forms of explanation—are and can only ever be partial; each takes up only some of the factors influencing the object of its theorizing. With those factors it constructs an explanation, a necessarily partial analysis fashioned around the particular subset of overdetermining factors upon which it focuses.

There are thus always alternative explanations or theories of why and how events occur. The multiple theories may be distinguished precisely by the particular subset of determining factors upon which they focus as they enter into their particular social analyses. As we have argued elsewhere, different theories have different entry points.⁸ Alternative theories vary according to which subset of aspects of any question they stress in producing their particular partial explanations.

It follows that we must move away from any notion of truth as singular to a notion rather of truths as plural. Each theory not only makes statements about what it takes to be social reality; it also erects criteria by which practitioners of that theory can decide which subsequent statements will be accepted into the growing knowledge generated by the theory and which will be rejected as incompatible. The criteria erected by each theory comprise its standards and definition of truth. Truths, then, vary with the theories in and by which they are produced. There is no intertheoretic standard of truth.⁹

The notion of overdetermination also may be applied to an explanation of why alternative theories differ. Thus, which particular entry points come to define any theory—that is, which particular subset of the infinite overdetermi-

8. For concrete applications of this notion of different entry points to the task of differentiating among economic theories, see Wolff and Resnick (1987); Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff (1990); and Resnick and Wolff (1992).

9. Such a statement, of course, affirms a particular definition and standard of truth. From the standpoint of the theory being articulated here, claims that a proposition constitutes an intertheoretic truth—an absolute truth for all theories—would be rejected.

nants of any object attract that theory's focal attention—is itself overdetermined. For example, the specifics of the radical movements in the early nineteenth century, the legacy of German philosophy culminating in Hegel, the effects of the industrial capitalist revolutions, the cultural changes sweeping Europe, and many other factors combined to overdetermine in Karl Marx his particular entry points. He thus fashioned a new social theory built around the entry points of a newly defined concept of class as *surplus labor production and distribution* and newly interpreted concepts of dialectics, materialism, and so on. Similarly, the transformed economic, political, cultural, and natural processes of late-nineteenth-century Europe combined to overdetermine in Sigmund Freud and others the idea of fashioning a new theory of the individual around the entry point of another newly defined process, the unconscious.

Thinking, like all other social processes, is overdetermined by all the other social processes. It is thus replete with the complex contradictions that such overdetermination entails. One form that these contradictions can and typically do take is the coexistence of different theories, since differently overdetermined thinkers find different entry points into social analysis persuasive. They make their theoretical commitments accordingly. If and when social conditions overdetermine many individuals to find a theory convincing, it can become a socially consequential truth.¹⁰ If and when social conditions change, such a theory will change, and its truth criteria will change. Under certain conditions, its persuasiveness may vanish; it will then perhaps disappear. Theories, like all other social processes, are overdetermined, contradictory, and ceaselessly changing.

This conceptualization of theory, of thinking, and of its results—knowledges—amounts to a distinctive epistemology that is clearly neither empiricism nor rationalism. There are no essences here: factual observations and theoretical reasonings are each distinct social processes that participate in each other's overdetermination. The truth criteria generated in each theory are overdetermined by observations and by reason, just as reason influences observation and vice versa. No single criterion of truth, applicable across all theories, is allowed. No factual reality is thinkable without taking account of the influence of one's theory among all the processes overdetermining that reality.

Althusser's critique of the conventional epistemologies, empiricist and rationalist, that characterized both the Marxian and non-Marxian traditions also offered an alternative epistemological position. He believed that alternative to be a uniquely Marxian epistemological position. The actual presence

10. To paraphrase Marx, a theory becomes powerful when the masses are so overdetermined as to make it their own, that is, find it the preferred way to make sense of their lives.

and prevalence within the Marxian tradition of empiricist and rationalist epistemologies resulted from their being imported uncritically from the non-Marxian tradition. Thus, he viewed his alternative epistemology as faithful to the epistemological break he understood Marx to have made (or at least to have inaugurated) vis-à-vis pre-Marxian philosophy.

Is Althusser's claim to have formulated explicitly a distinctive Marxian epistemology and social theory acceptable? The answer is of the frustrating yes-and-no variety. Let us examine the epistemological claim first. Theoretical developments, especially in France, among philosophers of science and discourse, literary theorists, and psychoanalysts but also elsewhere, had been moving steadily toward an epistemological position that more or less systematically rejected empiricism and rationalism. Bachelard, Canguilhem, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard; poststructuralism and postmodernism; Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Rorty—such figures and movements were all discarding the received traditions of various protocols (guarantees) of what a singular truth might be. They too championed difference as embodied in the multiplicity of truths, meanings, and realities. On the one hand, Althusser might be thought to have brought the implications of their work, with adjustments, into Marxism. Then his claim to have rediscovered Marx's unique epistemology would have to be questioned.

On the other hand, Althusser did make a profound "adjustment" to the epistemological break associated with some of the names and figures identified above. Moreover, that "adjustment" is surely of Marxian provenance. It concerns not only the political partisanship of all theory (others have stressed that as well) but also and more precisely the relation of theories to class structures and struggles.¹¹ The class struggles of any society necessarily participate in overdetermining the existence of all the theories—their entry points, truth criteria, and so on—operating in that society. In turn, the different theories of any time and place play their role in overdetermining its political dynamics. Thus it is possible and, from an Althusserian standpoint, necessary to interrogate every theory in terms of its conjunctural class conditions and consequences. Indeed, what a Marxian epistemology does is explicitly to include those conditions and consequences among its criteria of the acceptability of all existing theories, that is, its partisan attitude toward them.

Although influenced deeply by the non-Marxian intellectual currents swirl-

11. Political partisanship has been comparably attributed to all theories by, for example, feminist and antiracist theorists. What distinguishes Althusser's work here is the more specific attribution of class partisanship. Moreover, although there is not space here to elaborate the point, Althusser's notion of partisanship is quite nuanced; it entails the idea that partisanship, like everything else, is overdetermined and contradictory. The relation between a theory and a class structure will be contradictory; it will exhibit ways in which the theory at once supports and yet in other ways undermines a class structure. Thus, to take a partisan position toward a theory is not identical to arguing that it has a one-sided connection to a class structure.

ing around him, Althusser did nonetheless begin to fashion a distinctively Marxian epistemology.¹² It broke radically from the essentialist epistemologies of traditional social theory, Marxian and non-Marxian. It deployed the concepts of overdetermination and complex contradiction to champion truths instead of truth, differences among a multiplicity of theories rather than dogmatic adherence to an absolute-truth standard. Finally, it avoided the theoretical relativism that might otherwise attend such an epistemological position by articulating a Marxian theoretical basis for partisanship among the alternative truths developed in and by alternative social theories.

From such an epistemological standpoint, the statements made within any theoretical project are interrogated in terms of their social conditions and consequences, with special emphasis on class. That interrogation forms a basis upon which the statements will be accepted, rejected, or transformed for insertion into Marxian social theory. Marxian social theorists will take partisan positions toward and make alliances with proponents of other theories. These will be based, in part, on their theory's assessment of the class conditions and consequences of those theories in each specific social situation.¹³

All truths and all theories are not equally valid or acceptable from this standpoint. Nor are they accepted or rejected on the grounds of some absolute standard of a singular truth; such a protocol is exactly what Althusser's epistemological position rules out. They are all treated as partisan theories with their partisan truths. The partisanship of Marxian theory entails juxtaposing its assessment of other theories' contents against its assessment of their respective class conditions and consequences. Althusser's distinctive Marxian epistemology is thus neither a relativism nor a postmodernism in the manners associated with Foucault or Lyotard.¹⁴

V. An Althusserian Rethinking of Marxian Political Economy

A similar answer must be given to the question of Althusser's inauguration of a distinctive social theory. Marxists such as Lenin, Gramsci, and Lukács had

12. That he did so based on earlier Marxist work along similar epistemological lines—by Lenin, Lukács, Gramsci, Mao, and others—is argued in Resnick and Wolff (1987, chaps. 1 and 2).

13. The phrase "in part" here is meant to underscore that a commitment to overdetermination entails the recognition that a partisan position toward a theory is itself overdetermined. Partisanship cannot be reduced to a single determinant such as a theoretical assessment of a theory's relation to class. The point is that Marxian theory understands itself as introducing its own *theoretical* assessments of alternative theories explicitly into the web of overdeterminants (theoretical and nontheoretical) of partisanship—just as it believes that other theorists make perfectly parallel assessments, if only implicitly.

14. Regarding Foucault, this point was first made by Althusser's student, Dominique Lecourt (1975, 187–213); he also extended it to cover the related arguments of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend (Lecourt 1975, 7–19).

been struggling to produce a Marxian theory freed from the last-instance determinism that had haunted it ever since Engels tried to settle the issue (Marx and Engels 1975, 394–96). Althusser's notions of overdetermination and contradiction bring this long struggle to one possible resolution. Despite the economic determinism also present in his work, these notions permit Marxists to produce an entirely new—overdeterminist—understanding of the causal role of the economy in society.

From an Althusserian viewpoint, the economic base of society can no longer be assigned some ultimate causal primacy, as claimed by the proponents of economic determinism. Nor does this rejection of causal privilege for the economy open a door to a kind of reverse determinism in which economic development is reduced to an effect of the political or cultural superstructure. Instead, overdetermination offers a notion of base and superstructure as conditions of each other's existence.¹⁵ Each is understood to play an active role in constituting the existence of the other. Neither can be conceived to exist independently of the other. Thus, both orthodox economic determinism and the now fashionable noneconomic determinist theories (such as those, inside and outside the Marxian tradition, that essentialize culture or politics) are rejected. Althusser had found a way to liberate Marxian social theory from the determinist prison in which it had languished for almost one hundred years.

A distinctive way to understand society and history was now possible. By freeing Marxian social theory from the essentialisms of humanist and structuralist forms of thought, Althusser's work created a new way to view human agency, class, capital, and the laws of social motion. It permitted the construction of a theory of society in which no process—economic, political, cultural, or natural—and no site of processes—individual, enterprise, state, or household—could be conceived to exist as a cause without being itself caused. All, whether human agent or social structure, became defined within a web of mutual overdeterminations, and that web became the object of Marxist social analysis.

This formulation of a nonessentialist social theory meant that the development of processes and sites of processes was always uneven and contingent. Thus, such historic Marxian “inevitabilities” as class struggle, the transition from one mode of production to another, a declining profit rate, or economic crisis had to be reformulated as overdetermined contingencies.¹⁶ Althusser's ontology had no space in it for advancing any form of teleological development.

15. Indeed, given the determinist connotations of the base-superstructure metaphor, it would probably be better to reword matters in terms of different aspects of a social totality.

16. Two examples of this reformulation based on the concept of overdetermination can be found in Cullenberg's (1994) conception of the profit rate and DeMartino's (1992) understanding of economic crisis.

The last step in our argument that Althusser's interventions mark an epochal step in the development of Marxian theories involves demonstrating the wholly new kind of class analysis his work makes possible. If all entities are to be conceived in Marxism as processes, then that must apply to the entity called class as well. How may we read *Capital* to locate within it a concept of class as process? How would such a reading enable and provoke a new kind of Marxian class analysis?

VI. A New Marxian Class Analysis

Utilizing Althusser's work, we reread *Capital* with these questions in mind.¹⁷ Class for Marx refers to two particular social processes. The first kind of class process is the production and appropriation of surplus labor. In all human societies, some individuals perform labor transforming certain natural objects into use values. Such individuals perform a quantity of labor—expenditure of muscle and brain over time—sufficient to produce the goods and services necessary for their historically overdetermined standard of personal consumption. Marx calls this necessary labor. However, such individuals always perform more labor than the necessary quantity; they do what Marx calls surplus labor.

This surplus labor is not only produced, but it is always produced for someone. The question is, for whom? The issue is, who first receives into their hands—in Marx's words, who appropriates—the surplus labor being produced in every possible society? The process of producing surplus labor is thus also the process of appropriating it. We call this process of producing and appropriating surplus labor the *fundamental* class process to distinguish it from the second kind of class process that was defined by Marx. This second, or *subsumed*, class process refers to the distribution of surplus labor or its products by those who appropriate it. Marx elaborates the *capitalist* subsumed class process in detail in volume 3 of *Capital*. There, surplus labor (in its surplus *value* form) is distributed to a variety of persons (e.g., rents to landlords, interest to creditors, salaries to managers, etc.) who are neither performers nor appropriators of that surplus value. In any case, an existing combination of a fundamental and subsumed class process comprises a class structure.

Marx distinguishes different forms (different social arrangements) of the fundamental and subsumed class processes across human history. Indeed, he

17. See our *Knowledge and Class* (Resnick and Wolff 1987), especially chaps. 3–5, for a full exposition of this new Marxian class analysis and its application in particular to the more concrete analyses of capitalist enterprises and the state.

offers a periodization of history in terms of societies' different class structures, that is, how they have variously organized their productions, appropriations, and distributions of surplus labor. Depending on social conditions, surplus labor or its products may be appropriated by the same individuals who perform that surplus labor, or alternatively, it may be appropriated by other individuals who do not perform it.

Marx refers to arrangements whereby the individuals who collectively produce surplus also collectively appropriate their own surplus as communism. When the same individual both performs and appropriates surplus labor but does so *individually*, Marx calls that the "ancient" or, elsewhere, the "petty" class structure.¹⁸ In contrast to these, among social arrangements in which some individuals appropriate the surplus produced by others, Marx distinguishes capitalist, feudal, and slave class structures. While Marx theorized still other forms of the fundamental class process, he focused his work overwhelmingly on the contemporarily prevalent form, capitalism.

Once Marx theorized where and how this fundamental class process existed within a capitalist society—the object of *Capital*, volume 1—he went on to analyze a logical next question, namely, what was done with the appropriated surplus labor (or its products)? To which persons was it distributed, for what purposes, and with what consequences? Marx's complex answer held that the products of surplus labor were usually distributed by its appropriators to other people in society (landlords, bankers, managers, etc.). The goal of this distribution, Marx argued, was generally (although not necessarily) to secure the conditions of existence of the particular form of the fundamental class processes generating the surplus labor. In simplest terms, the subsumed class process in capitalism aimed to secure the specifically capitalist form of surplus appropriation.

The recipients of distributed shares of the appropriated surplus labor are thereby enabled to live and work, even though they do not participate in producing or appropriating surplus labor. The different groups of people who obtain distributed shares of appropriated surplus play a specific role in Marx's conception of a society's class structure. They are understood to perform specific nonclass processes that provide conditions of existence for the fundamental class process. In return for so doing, they obtain distributions of the surplus.

To take a modern example, state functionaries educate present and future performers of surplus labor, thereby securing a condition of existence of the fundamental class process, namely, a supply of capable workers. In return for so doing, capitalists take a portion of the surplus they appropriate from their

18. Using the notions of fundamental and subsumed class processes and of overdetermination, Gabriel (1990) produces a rigorous analytical treatment of an "ancient" class structure.

productive laborers (a fundamental class process) and distribute it (a subsumed class process) to these state functionaries to enable them to perform the nonclass process of education. Such state functionaries are then understood to participate in, among many others, the following two different social processes: the nonclass process of education and the subsumed class process (since they receive a distributed portion of appropriated surplus—in the form, say, of taxes). Other examples of individuals in a capitalist class structure who can obtain subsumed class distributions of appropriated surplus include bankers who lend money to industrial capitalists, lawyers who handle legal problems for industrial capitalists, managers who run industrial enterprises, merchants who handle the selling of output for industrial capitalists, owners of wealth who provide capitalists with access to the means of production, and a host of others. Two analytical and empirical studies of the contradictory relationships between such subsumed classes and the appropriators of surplus value are Hillard's (1988) study of corporate engineers who secure research and development as one of the conditions of existence for surplus value, and Kuh's (1988) work on bankers providing credit to help finance industrial capitalists' accumulation of capital.

VII. Some Research Programs of the New Marxian Political Economy

Using Althusser's notions of overdetermination and contradiction to think of class in terms of social processes rather than as distinct groups of people is having far-reaching consequences for the entire corpus of Marxian social theory and especially for the new Marxian political economy. The class-as-process approach suggests that individuals may participate in various fundamental and subsumed class processes during the course of a day or a lifetime. Similarly, there may be different forms of the fundamental class process at different sites in a society at the same time. To take one example, recent research on China suggests that growth in recent decades of individual self-employment (what Marx termed the "ancient" class structure) in the rural areas is so transforming the mix of Chinese class structures as to raise the possibility of an "ancient" road to communism (Gabriel and Martin 1992). Another body of research within the new Marxian political economy enabled by Althusser has inquired whether class processes exist within modern households, and if so, what kind are they and how do they interact with class processes occurring outside households (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1989). One finding has been that U.S. households have been the sites of feudal class structures for most of this century. This means that the U.S. social formation needs to be reanalyzed as a specific mix of capitalist production of surplus going on in large enterprises, individual craft or service producers—

"ancients"—appropriating their own individual surpluses, and feudal class structures connecting husbands and wives inside households.

In bluntest terms, the "capitalist" designation of social formations such as the United States is newly problematized and qualified. This research also suggests how under some circumstances the interaction of different class structures in society can sustain them, while under other circumstances they may very well undermine one another. Thus, the political and cultural developments of a society depend, in ways not heretofore appreciated, on the specific mix of and relations among the different class structures individuals must negotiate throughout their lifetimes in that society. Such research implies that class analyses of societies must presume and explore far greater complexities of class structures than has been traditional in Marxism.

Stated otherwise, the old dualistic model of two great contesting classes, capitalists and proletarians, has to give way to the presumption that individuals can and do participate in multiple and different kinds of class processes, fundamental and subsumed, at different sites in society across their lifetimes. Further, categorizations of social groups that previously attributed a uniformity to them in class terms can now be shown to dissolve under this new class analysis. Cullenberg (1992) has explored this at an abstract level to clarify the multiplicity of class structures enabled by an Althusserian reading of the Marxian argument on class. There are also several quite concrete and empirical examples of such class analysis now available. Stormes's (1988) study of the "poor" in the United States demonstrates the coexistence of multiple class structures among them and its relevance to any serious solution to the "problem of poverty." Annunziato's (1990) research, showing how labor unions in the United States can and do take on a class structure of their own rather than merely functioning as an "agent" or "organization" of workers, yields original and provocative new insights into the current crisis of organized labor. Comparable analyses and conclusions have been generated in Kayatekin's (1990) study of how sharecropping arrangements in agrarian areas around the world reveal multiple and different class structures, in de Santamaria's (1987) detailed research showing how the peasantry in a rural community in Colombia occupy multiple class and nonclass positions, in Feiner's (1988) history of slavery that explains how different subsumed class distributions of the appropriated surplus acted to sustain and undermine the class structure of slavery, and in Weiss's (1981) reformulation of the history of colonial Massachusetts in terms of one social formation's different and contending class structures. These findings carry heavy implications concerning the linkages between any individual's or group's political interests and its complex, multiple participations in quite diverse and perhaps clashing class processes.

Similarly, the notion of class as process problematizes another old sim-

plicity of Marxists and other radicals. The Althusserian process-oriented approach to social theory differentiates between processes of power and class. That is, power refers to processes (legislative, executive, and judicial) in which individuals order one another's behavior in society (e.g., that ordering of behavior known as private property). Class refers instead to very different processes, in which individuals participate in the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor. From the standpoint of overdetermination, it follows that class and power processes are both causes and effects of each other: the new Marxian political economy aims to analyze their mutual overdetermination. By contrast, traditional socialist (including Marxist) theorists and activists have either collapsed power and class—making them virtual synonyms, as in the term "ruling class"—or made one the essential cause of the other (Olson 1985; Resnick and Wolff 1986). This has often had disastrous results. For example, Biewener (1990) has shown how Mitterand's socialists in France, by focusing on class change as a matter of redistributing power rather than as a matter of changing the organization of the production and distribution of surplus labor, missed an opportunity to advance the cause of class transformation throughout Europe and also prepared their own demise as in any basic way a challenge to capitalism.

Althusser's focus on overdetermination and contradiction has also prompted those involved in the new Marxian political economy critically to appropriate certain insights from postmodernist literature and thereby to redefine the field in terms of a terrain of alternative, clashing discourses (Amariglio 1990; Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff 1990). Some have moved to bring the decentered subject of postmodernism into a rethinking of the central Marxist notion of commodity fetishism (Amariglio and Callari 1989). Still others use the basis of overdetermination to criticize and offer alternatives to the deterministic structures of major schools of contemporary left and Marxist economics, such as Graham's (1991) critique of the "Fordism/Post-Fordism" periodization of recent capitalist history, Norton's (1988a, 1988b) critiques of the widespread essentialization of capital accumulation as *the* determinant of capitalist development, Diskin's (1990) critical review of the ubiquitous property or power determinisms functioning within classical Marxism's notion of socialism, and DeMartino's (1992) critique of the "necessary/contingent dualism" operating in leading Marxist crisis theories. Graham, Norton, Diskin, and DeMartino not only demonstrate the unacknowledged and undefended determinism of the schools they criticize; they also show its undesirable political and theoretical consequences.

Another project of the new Marxian political economy entails a reexamination and rethinking of the structure-agent or structuralism-humanism dichotomy that is a focus of debate inside Marxian but also inside much non-Marxian economics. Eschewing as determinist both the structuralist and

humanist sides, the point is to specify an overdeterminist position. Here the idea is to show how social structures shape and are shaped by individual subjects in a continuous dialectic without assigning explanatory primacy to either pole. Two examples of this structuralist-humanist dichotomy operating both within and without Marxian economics are Cullenberg's (1994) demonstration of a Hegelian (structuralist) versus Cartesian (humanist) dichotomy informing the long-standing Marxist debates over the tendency of the profit rate to fall in capitalism and Ruccio's (1991) explanation of a parallel dichotomy operating within the leading non-Marxian approaches to economic development in Latin America.

Still another project in which many are involved may be summarily described as follows: given the long history of people's needing and seeking an absolute truth as the motivation for revolutionary commitment and activity, theory and practice, how can a Marxian economics that is epistemologically self-conscious about the relativity of all knowledge win adherents? Gramsci was among those Marxists most attuned to this question. His work is an appropriate starting point to answer this question. The issue becomes one of charting a revolutionary "war of position" that is epistemologically, as well as class analytically, self-conscious in the light of the new Marxian economics.

Marxian value theory itself is hardly immune from the consequences of an overdeterminist perspective. Wolff, Callari, and Roberts (1982, 1984) and Roberts (1987) use the categories of overdetermination and class to produce a completely new understanding of Marx's transformation of values into prices of production. They show that both the criticisms directed against value theory and the defenses they have engendered have been produced within thoroughly determinist discourses. The point of their work is to show how the reformulation of Marx's categories of production prices and values as *overdetermined* variables dissolves long-standing criticisms directed against value theory. In a similar way, DelGiudice (1991) uses the concepts of class and overdetermination to produce a new way to conceive of capitalists' costs of production. Understanding producer costs as an overdetermined entity leads to a radically different approach to conceiving of a country's so-called comparative advantage and hence the reasons for its international imports and exports. Roche (1981) uses the concept of overdetermination to free a Marxian theory of money and crisis from the production determinism in which it has languished for so long. His work demonstrates how, in capitalism, relatively autonomous monetary processes help to overdetermine capital accumulation, economic crisis, and exploitation. Curtis (1984) creates the space for a new way to conceive of the Marxian category of the value of labor power. Once again based on the Althusserian notion of overdetermination, his study of the South African labor force produces the details of how the value of African labor power was constituted in part by effects emanating from different class and nonclass processes operating in that country.

Influenced by Althusser's break with determinist modes of reasoning, these studies help to launch a completely new kind of overdeterminist Marxian economics. Still others reconstruct the history of economic thought, thereby creating a new way to conceive of the origins of this discipline and the theoretical differences and struggles that have helped to shape it. Studies developing an Althusserian approach to the history of economic thought can be found in the following: Sinisi's (1992) philosophical reading of Smith and the differences between the contending visions of Smith and Hobbes that continue to shape different positions taken by economists today; Callari's (1981) reformulation of classical economic thought; Olson's (1985) study of how the notion of class has been used in Marxian theory; Medley's (1989) critique of Samir Amin's theory of third world underdevelopment; Norton's (1986, 1988a, 1992) sustained criticisms of Sweezy's, Mandel's, and Steindl's theories of the development of monopoly capitalism; Wilson's (1986) examination of the ontological basis of leading neoclassical and neo-Ricardian trade theorists; and Silver's (1987) critique of socialist theorists from Lenin to Stalin to Bettelheim. They pose the question of the structure of these different discourses—their different entry points, deployed logics, epistemological positions, and created objects of thought. They underscore the different societal consequences produced by these different discursive structures, including the very contrived boundaries that separate one economic theory from another. They seek, in particular, to identify the differences between Marxian and classical and neoclassical political economy.

Finally, our own research currently focuses on a systematic class analysis of the former USSR. In choosing to focus there, we return to what was likewise a major stimulus of Althusser's interventions. Much of his work evolved from criticisms of the "official" Marxian theories promoted by the Soviet Union and its allied Communist parties. Much of ours is now aimed at discerning the actual class structures that comprised the USSR from 1917 to 1990 and to explore their relationship to the kinds of Marxian theory developed there and to the current social changes. Following his lead, we began by rejecting any notion that socializations of property or suppressions of markets removed classes and hence class analysis from relevance in understanding Soviet development. On the contrary, the point was to investigate how these changes in property and distribution of resources and products affected the class processes inside the USSR.

We have found that those changes, interacting with the particular culture and politics of Soviet society, including the then-prevalent interpretations of Marxian theory as to the transition from capitalism to socialism, *did not* overdetermine a shift to communist forms of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus. Instead, the state enterprises that replaced private enterprises in industrial production maintained an exploitative, indeed capitalist, class structure, a specific form of state capitalism. Only on the collective

farms and only for a relatively short time after the early 1930s was a serious experiment in the collective appropriation of surplus labor by its performers (i.e., a communist class structure) undertaken. However, partly because a determinist Soviet Marxism reduced the existence of socialism and the overtaking of capitalism to necessary consequences of socialization of property and central economic planning, the investigation and discussion of the actual multiple class structures in the USSR and their internal and relational contradictions could not occur. With the collapse of those structures now and with the theoretical breakthrough to an overdeterminist Marxism, it becomes possible to do the kind of Marxian class analysis that had been impossible before.¹⁹

In our research, the picture of the USSR that emerges is one in which a state capitalism was constructed, partly by and partly despite the very Marxian theories premised upon the transition from capitalism to communism. Like private capitalism, Soviet state capitalism generated its own contradictions and crises, although these could not be understood as such precisely because official Marxism could not think of them in that way. A remarkable gulf opened and widened across this century between the class realities and the rhetoric of Soviet society. It has now exploded with the stunning historical irony that a people's revulsion against an oppressive state capitalism takes the form of a rejection of socialism and communism. In any case, our new Marxian political economy research program on the USSR builds centrally upon Althusser's notions of the mutual overdetermination of and contradictions among the class structures and theoretical formulations of Soviet history. Its means of analysis is a Marxian theoretical framework, forged out of a critical engagement with official Soviet Marxism, to which Althusser made key contributions. Its procedure is to reformulate a new Marxian class analysis of the USSR, one that uses the logic of overdetermination to construct the relationship among class, politics, and culture there. Its goal is to assess the successes and the failures from this longest-lasting and most ambitious of historical attempts to go beyond capitalism, to draw the lessons that will inform and thereby improve the next attempts.

VIII. Conclusion

In epistemology and in social theory, Althusser's break with the determinisms endemic to the Marxian tradition has had and continues to have epochal

19. Of course, other Marxists have produced critical analyses of the USSR throughout its history. Indeed, some of these were class analyses (e.g., Bettelheim 1976, 1978). However, there were no analyses in terms of a logic of overdetermination and in terms of class as a process of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. Bettelheim, for example, worked in a determinist framework, with class defined in terms of the wielding of power, not in terms of surplus labor. These points are developed in detail in our recent work on the class analysis of the USSR (Resnick and Wolff 1993, 1994).

ramifications. His notions of overdetermination and contradiction and his initial elaboration of their implications have set in motion a broad reconceptualization and extension of Marxism generally and of Marxian political economy in particular. Some of the dimensions of the latter have been discussed briefly here. The inevitable fits and starts and forward and backward oscillations of any theoretical revolution attend Althusser's project, too. Yet if Marxism needs periodic renewal and transformation to enable it to meet the changing historical conditions facing those committed to move beyond capitalism, then Althusser's contributions and their developments by those he taught deserve the closest attention. They are serving precisely as indispensable means for such a renewal and transformation.

Althusser is especially important for those postmodernists who are serious about Marxism and those Marxists who are serious about postmodernism. His work is the first effort systematically to engage the project of integrating these two movements theoretically. He recognized, albeit in the language of his time and place, that such an integration would necessarily work transformations on both sides: yielding what we would now label either a distinctively postmodernist Marxism or a distinctively Marxist postmodernism. This is a Marxism comfortable in its own particularity and its contribution to the contemporary transcendence of modernism. This is also a kind of postmodernism that has gone beyond deconstructing modernisms to participate as well in constructing new revolutionary movements for societies finally freed from class exploitation.

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